

Annex VII: Main results of the corporate evaluation of UNFPA support to population and housing census data to inform decision-making and policy formulation (2005-2014)

Introduction

Grounded within the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action, UNFPA is the United Nations agency mandated to address population and development issues, with an emphasis on reproductive health and gender equality. Census support is a key component of UNFPA support to population and development: during the 2010 census round, UNFPA supported more than 130 countries, with expenditure totalling \$301.7 million. Support was delivered via policy dialogue and advice, advocacy, technical assistance, capacity development, procurement of equipment and/or services, funding, and coordination and management.

Key conclusions

UNFPA support has been a key contributor to the 2010 census round, with the support provided being largely positive. UNFPA contributed significantly to enhancing the capacity of National Statistical Offices to produce and make available census data in line with international standards. UNFPA played an important role in creating an enabling environment for census to be conducted, with support strongly aligned with government priorities and the data needs of national and regional stakeholders. UNFPA support was characterised by efficient fund management and adaptability, resulting in timely censuses in even the most challenging of circumstances. UNFPA support proved essential to ensuring the inclusion of gender equality considerations throughout the census process and, on the whole, was sensitive to and effective in including human rights considerations.

UNFPA was strategically positioned during the 2010 census round as a key census player worldwide. UNFPA is unanimously recognized as an important contributor to population and housing censuses globally. However, despite the fact that census support is often seen as a flagship of UNFPA support at country level, UNFPA support to the 2010 round was rather disperse overall, with the UNFPA Special Initiative on Census discontinued prior to the end of the round. Despite the importance of census to advancing outcome four of the UNFPA 2014-2017 Strategic Plan, the strategy does not comprehensively reflect the weight census holds at country level.

There are concerns that internal expertise within UNFPA on census is diminishing. The well-received role of UNFPA as a convener around census and the census knowledge and expertise of UNFPA staff is seen as a key asset, contributing to donor trust. Despite this, in house expertise has substantially declined throughout the 2010 census round. In addition, the lack of an organised and systematized corporate backstopping system has resulted in census support relying mostly on individual capacity rather than on an institutionalised and systematic approach.

The 2010 census round has focused predominately on enhancing the production of census and census related data, placing disproportionately less attention on data dissemination, analysis and use in policy-making. UNFPA did not maximise the possibilities that more effective dissemination tools offer in fostering the use of data. Similarly, support to the use of census related data seldom went beyond user-producer workshops and did not rely on a long-term strategy to develop the analytical capacities of statistical offices, ministries and civil society. Capacity development activities were conducted but were limited in scope and, given the context described, were insufficient to generate the desired changes. The expected changes in data analysis and use for policy-making did not occur.

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UNFPA support to census features good quality assurance mechanisms, including for census governance. However, the structure and use of these mechanisms varies in practice and are not detailed within corporate guidance. Quality assurance mechanisms include mechanisms to ensure and measure data quality as well as census governance mechanisms. These mechanisms are crucial to ensure good data quality, and guarantee the application of the United Nations principles, transparency, and accountability, and guarantee the independence of the census process and subsequent results. UNFPA, particularly at regional and country level, has played a distinctive role in ensuring that these mechanisms are in place. However, despite their importance, no common minimum standards have been established and the mechanisms differ across countries.

Value for money of UNFPA support to census varies, depending on that which is being assessed. Value for money is high for UNFPA support to national capacity for data production and availability, low for support to national capacity for data use, and extremely high in corporate value. On the latter, though expenditure is quite modest, support to census confers upon UNFPA an important corporate strategic positioning at country level, above and beyond the impact produced of census support to data production and use.

UNFPA support to census is highly demand-driven, which is a positive feature, as it generates national ownership and leadership. However, in the absence of systematic, high quality and timely needs assessments, there are also risks associated with this approach. Risks appear when the approach is taken to an extreme, that is, when country offices merely respond to demands, rather than proactively addressing challenges. In such cases (i) the UNFPA advisory role is undermined, as purely demand-driven approaches tend to compromise innovative and constructive advice from UNFPA; and (ii) UNFPA support tends to focus on short-term, rather than on mid to long-term plans and strategies.

Population censuses are statistical operations of a technical nature but also carry significant socio-political implications as they may have an impact on aspects related to ethnicity, equity, diversity, and religion - particularly in countries with diverse political, ethnic and religious landscapes. However, no UNFPA wide guidance on how to address these dimensions and ensure the reliability, credibility and legitimacy of census results currently exists.

Population censuses are invaluable tools for monitoring progress in development indicators. However, UNFPA has not yet prompted partner governments to explore the full potential of linking and combining census data with national surveys or other sources of data for development, including administrative sources and big data. During the 2010 round, UNFPA support on data collection remained quite siloed, with support to census and support to surveys often delivered separately. Big data potentially offers the ability to update census information during inter-censal periods and/or further investigate crucial global challenges, such as migration, health and poverty. Yet, the analytical possibilities of the census, alone or in combination with other data sources, was not fully explored.

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Key recommendations

UNFPA should continue and scale up support to population and housing censuses, drawing up on a coherent corporate strategy and guidance for the 2020 round. UNFPA support to National Statistical Offices capacity to conduct census and other surveys should ultimately result in enhanced capacity for data use in policy-making, and further advance the implementation of both the ICPD agenda and the SDGs related to the mandate of the organisation. Census should be understood as the backbone of national statistical systems and support should be envisioned as a continuous and dynamic process throughout the entire 10-year inter-censal period.

UNFPA should adapt current human resource and technical assistance strategies to address in house attrition of census expertise and ensure adequate support to the 2020 census round. Toward this end, UNFPA should consider conducting a mapping exercise of in-house census expertise. Additionally, UNFPA should further capitalize on census Chief Technical Advisers, whose knowledge and expertise are often not absorbed institutionally. Based on the mapping, UNFPA should conduct a capacity assessment of in-house census expertise and develop a capacity development strategy to address existing gaps, which could include bringing together regionally based technical census teams to provide support.

UNFPA should work together with national statistical offices to ensure that census related data is disseminated in a manner that fosters the use of data in policy-making and advocacy. Dissemination is the link between data availability and use for policy-making. UNFPA should advocate for and facilitate more frequent user-producer consultations on census data dissemination. UNFPA could also play a bridging role when promoting the use of anonymised micro-data, working together with the NSO to raise awareness on feasible alternatives for publishing anonymised micro-data. Finally, thematic reports (which utilize census data) should highlight inequalities or gaps in access to resources, thus supporting the allocation of public expenditure based on empirical assessments.

In collaboration with programme countries, UNFPA should explore the potential uses of combining census data with other sources, including surveys, administrative records and big data to foster the full use of census data in the framework of national statistical systems. UNFPA should explore the possibilities of developing analysis on topics related to its mandate, such as family planning, child marriage, and the demographic dividend. UNFPA should build upon its recognized convening role and expand upon it by more actively participating in country forums to strengthen national statistical capacity.

UNFPA should examine new funding mechanisms to specifically support the dissemination and use of census related data. Particularly UNFPA should reflect upon the possibilities offered by and feasibility of a global level trust fund dedicated exclusively to supporting the *dissemination* and *use* of census related data in the 2020 census round. This trust fund could address some of the challenges raised by the evaluation, including specifically i) limited levels of support to dissemination and use of data and ii) the narrow conception of census (i.e. census seen as a one-off exercise).